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Don't Confuse Us with the Facts: Visualizing the Frontier in the Capital City

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG
In Rom sind auf fünf vorhandenen Staatsreliefs Darstellungen römischer Architektur entlang der Limesgrenzen erhalten: Die Trajanssäule, der sogenannte Große Trajanische Fries, die Mark-Aurel-Säule, die Reliefplatten eines nicht weiter erhaltenen Bogens von Mark Aurel und der Septimius-Severus-Bogen. Diese architektonischen Darstellungen sind als Nachweis der engen Verbindungen zwischen diesen Reliefs und den triumphalen Gemälden interpretiert worden, welche nun alle verschollen sind. Die vorliegende Studie zeigt, dass bei der Darstellung von Grenzarchitektur, anders als bisher angenommen, weniger Wert auf Genauigkeit gelegt wurde, sondern diese eher im Sinne einer breiteren politischen Agenda fungierte. Diese Studie untersucht zudem unser Verständnis der Triumphgemälde und hinterfragt, inwieweit der Triumphzug durch Rom dem römischen Volk tatsächlich Informationen über die besiegten Grenzgebiete zur Verfügung stellte.

The Roman triumph has long been recognized as an ingenious means of transforming an act achieved far from home into political currency in Rome[1]. Unfortunately for modern scholars, all of the individual components that made up the triumph have left little trace in the material record. Monumental reliefs provide an intriguing exception, not only because they are our main source of ancient depictions of triumphs, but also because certain reliefs seem to have close connections with so-called triumphal paintings. In particular, these reliefs share notable, unusual features with literary descriptions of the said paintings, specifically an interest in the conquered landscapes and architecture.

Scholars originally assumed that the depicted landscapes and architecture in question were documentary illustrations, intended to show off with anthropological accuracy the conquered territories to their new rulers in Rome. Close critical analysis, however, reveals that in sculpture these features have been carefully manipulated to serve the larger ideological goals of their monuments. This challenges how we imagine the Roman triumph as a source of information about the frontier for the audience in Rome. Were the maps or the scenes of battle carried in the parade accurate? Or were they composed with more care for politics than cartography? What did the average Roman really know about the frontier anyway?

This article uses depictions of frontier architecture in monumental reliefs as a case study to question triumphal paintings as a source of information about conquered territories

Fig. 1: Trajan's Column Scene LXXXVI: provincial civilian settlement (casts in Museo della Civiltà Romana; photo by author).

for Rome. Five extant monuments in the capital include representations of frontier buildings: Trajan's Column, the so-called Great Trajanic Frieze, the Column of Marcus Aurelius, the panels from a lost arch of Marcus Aurelius and the Arch of Septimius Severus. The focus of this study will be to demonstrate how depictions of frontier architecture in these reliefs acted in the service of larger political agendas and the implications for triumphal representations.

PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP AND CURRENT APPROACH

Scholarship on the triumph has seen a significant shift in focus, from historical aspects (the ritual's genesis, who triumphed when) to more theoretical concerns, such as the triumph's role in elite competition and cultural memory[2]. This mirrors a similar shift in approach to the study of monumental reliefs[3], where scholarship has moved away from

Fig. 2: Trajan's Column Scene XV: Dacian settlement. Note fantastical stone building on stilts (upper right) (casts in Museo della Civiltà Romana; photo by author).

seeing the reliefs as accurate documentaries of historical events, to analyzing them as artefacts shaped by ideological and political forces[4].

These theoretical shifts have not yet seen widespread application to the study of depictions of frontier architecture. Instead, what little attention has been paid to the buildings has focused almost exclusively on using them to reconstruct actual architectural practice along the frontiers. For example, the huts on the Column of Marcus Aurelius were employed in early anthropological studies of Germanic tribes[5]. In contrast, I contend that the depictions of frontier architecture were as subject as any other aspect of the reliefs to the influence of ideology, above concerns for accuracy[6].

Depictions of frontier architecture have played an important role in hypotheses about the relationships between triumphal paintings and monumental reliefs. Scholars originally were puzzled by the lack of precedent in monumental reliefs for the spiral frieze of Trajan's Column. They thus looked outside sculpture for a source of inspiration. Notably, some of the more unusual features of the column frieze included depicted landscapes, sieges and frontier architecture. Literary descriptions of triumphal paintings, particularly a famous passage in Josephus[7], also emphasize landscapes and architecture. This coincidence led scholars to suggest that monumental reliefs reflect, however distantly, triumphal paintings[8].

Complicating the picture are recent arguments that many of the literary passages typically interpreted as referring to triumphal paintings actually describe three-dimensional models, or perhaps painted or tapestried stage backgrounds[9]. Scholars have also begun to distinguish a category of more elaborate paintings produced after the triumph for permanent public display[10]. Since my arguments in the current context would hold equally true for models and stage backdrops, as well as for paintings produced after the parade, I will continue to use here the familiar term "triumphal paintings" broadly to refer to any representation of foreign lands prepared in association with a triumph.

Such arguments raise questions about the logistics of producing the artefacts that would commemorate a victory. Sadly, it is impossible to pinpoint who was responsible for each stage of production, from the initial decision to erect a monument, to its content and to the rendering of individual elements[11]. Thus, in this article I will use the shorthand term "the production team" to refer to anyone and everyone involved in the production of the sculptures, paintings or triumphs. Turning to visibility, a significant sample of sculpted depictions of frontier architecture would have been clearly visible from ground level (for the columns they are the most visible features) and almost all depictions are rendered in the same detail as those that were unquestionably visible[12]. For triumphal paintings, there

Fig. 3: Great Trajanic Frieze: Dacian captives and hut (casts in Museo della Civiltà Romana; photo by author).

Fig. 4: Column of Marcus Aurelius Scene VII: destruction of barbarian settlement (photo by E. C. Robinson).

would have been limits on how closely any architectural representations could have been assessed during the procession itself. If representations were put on permanent display later, this would have allowed for further contemplation, but scale may have prevented close inspection. We can only note here that such issues must be borne in mind.

DEPICTED FRONTIER ARCHITECTURE IN MONUMENTAL RELIEFS

Trajan's Column has the earliest, most numerous (326 illustrated structures) and complex representation of frontier constructions in monumental reliefs[13]. There are definitive trends in how this architecture is depicted that are more connected to ideology than architectural accuracy. For example, buildings associated with populations loyal to Rome are characterized by signs of sophisticated stone construction. This leads to certain oddities, such as temporary marching camps constructed in quadratic masonry, or an elaborate theatre that would be more at home in Rome itself than in Moesia (Fig. 1). Contrariwise, Dacian architecture is dominated by strange, wooden constructions. Again, this does not give an overwhelmingly accurate picture of actual architectural practice in Dacia. It ignores a developed local tradition of monumental buildings in stone and some buildings, like a stone structure on stilts, are blatantly illogical (Fig. 2).

It is not that the production team simply had no idea what was going on in the frontier and filled things in according to their own imagination[14]. They clearly had some remarkably detailed information available to them: there are intriguing glimpses of the circular sanctuary in *Sarmizegetusa* or the distinctive fortification construction technique known as the *murus Dacicus*. Instead, the production team chose to present a particular picture of the frontier, one where every loyal town is familiar, secure and prosperous and every enemy settlement is strange, ephemeral and under threat.

The complex architectural depictions of the Trajan's Column stand in stark contrast to those of the so-called Great Trajanic Frieze[15]. Here extant frontier architecture is limited to two straw huts (Fig. 3). This is strange, since both monuments seem to commemorate the same war and their handling of the Dacian figures is so similar that A.-M. Leander Touati suggested that the same sculptors worked on both monuments. So what explains the sudden change in the representation of Dacian architecture? The answer can be found by looking at the monuments as a whole. On the Column, the Dacians fit the stereotype of the noble enemy, offering spirited resistance. The message of the Great Trajanic Frieze, in contrast, is one of total and almost effortless dominance of the Roman army over a desperate enemy. The architecture fits in with these broader themes. On the Column, the enemy architecture is inferior but complex, part of the challenging resistance of a worthy enemy. On the Frieze, the simple huts help characterize the barbarians as patently inferior to their Roman adversaries.

A similar phenomenon can be seen on the Column of Mar-

Fig. 6: Column of Marcus Aurelius Scene I: frontier settlement. Note perishable building (third from left) and palisade for fourth building at far right (casts in LIMESEUM und Römerpark Ruffenhofen; photo by author).

Fig. 5: Trajan's Column Scene I: frontier settlement (casts in Museo della Civiltà Romana; photo by author).

Fig. 7: Column of Marcus Aurelius Scene I: first building of frontier settlement. Note tile roof, ashlar masonry and columns framing door (LIMESEUM und Römerpark Ruffenhofen; photo by author).

cus Aurelius. Like the Great Trajanic Frieze, the Antonine column emphasizes total Roman dominance over a desperate enemy[16] and, like the Frieze, almost all the barbarian architecture on the Column is portrayed as simple huts (Fig. 4)[17]. This is striking, because the Antonine column is clearly modelled on the Trajanic frieze, even at the level of the composition of specific scenes[18]. The Antonine column, however, does not engage in its predecessor's representation of complex barbarian architecture. This is not because the Germans lived in huts and the Dacians lived in fantastical houses on stilts. It is because these different approaches to the representation of frontier architecture fit within the very different themes of their respective monuments.

An analytical comparison of the two columns' opening depictions of the frontier reveals further how the production team used architecture to accomplish subtle distinctions in message. The Antonine depiction is clearly modelled closely on the Trajanic version[19], but with notable alterations. The Trajanic scene (Scenes I–II) begins with two stone buildings set against a blank background (Fig. 5). The Antonine opening (Scenes I–II) borrows the buildings' general forms, but doubles their number and changes the details (Fig. 6). Three buildings are given fancy elements such as ashlar masonry, decorative columns and tiled roofs (Figs. 6–7). In contrast, one building is represented as made of some sort of organic material, like the barbarian huts (Fig. 6). The production team has also added a large fence behind the scene[20]. The combination presents a very specific picture of the frontier: the fancy buildings say the frontier is valuable, while the perishable building says the frontier is vulnerable. The fence portrays the frontier as protected, but also calls attention to the dangers lurking beyond. This is the sort of frontier that historically Marcus Aurelius moved out to protect in response to border attacks, leading to a series of costly, bitter wars.

The sculpted frontier thus sets the scene and provides the justification for the vengeful battle narrative that will follow. This is a different tone than the Trajanic frontier, which fits better into that Column's narrative of calm, determined assimilation. Unlike the Antonine frontier, the Trajanic frontier will be incorporated within the new province of Dacia. There will be no need here for a fence. All of

Fig. 8: Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome Panel IV: siege against two cities. Note foreign architecture in upper right corner (photo by author).

this demonstrates that when it came to frontier architecture, the Antonine production team was not blindly copying from Trajan's Column. Instead, they were borrowing and consciously altering material to fit within the theme of their monument.

Here I will only note in passing the panels of a lost arch of Marcus Aurelius[21], especially since they preserve only a single frontier building, a large stone structure in the *Rex Datus* Panel. My final example of depicted frontier architecture is the numerous besieged cities on the Arch of Septimius Severus[22]. Here heavy emphasis has been placed on the foreign nature of the extensive architecture shown within the fortification walls (Fig. 8). This serves two purposes. It portrays the cities captured by Severus as valuable exotic prizes, when in reality several of the defeated cities, such as Babylon, were at this point basically backwaters. The obviously foreign architecture also makes clear at a glance that these are not Roman cities under siege. This was important, given that the other war that Severus had recently won was waged against his fellow Romans. The depicted architecture leaves no room for confusion.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is obvious then that the five monuments all take very different approaches to the depiction of frontier architecture. What all these monuments share is an interest in using depictions of frontier architecture in the service of their broader political agendas. In other words, we cannot trust them as accurate depictions of the frontiers. The larger point, however, is that the ancient Romans could not trust them either. Going further, if the sculpted architecture is not to be trusted, there is no reason to think that their painted equivalents in the triumph were any less manipulated. And if the paintings were potentially inaccurate, to what extent could you trust anything else that came down the Sacred Way?

The implications of these observations cannot be explored fully in the limited scope of this article. Instead, I would like to suggest several areas for further inquiry and research.

Firstly, scholars have increasingly highlighted the political machinations behind the triumphal ritual as a whole, but less scepticism has been applied towards the individual components that made up the parade[23]. Assembling a triumph is presented as a syntactic process of choosing and putting in order impartial components. Yet the repeated motif in ancient sources of a bad emperor manufacturing components of a triumph, on a remarkably detailed level[24], demonstrates the motif's power to shock ancient audiences and in its subversion emphasizes the importance of the idea that everything presented in the triumph was supposed to be untampered. This motif also reveals a Roman awareness that these components could be manipulated[25]. We modern scholars need to be equally

sceptical of the items paraded through Rome.

Secondly, the ancient sources emphasize that the delivery of accurate, detailed information about the campaigns was one of the most important ostensive goals of the triumph. This can be seen in the above-mentioned passage of Josephus, which marvels at the accuracy of the information represented in triumphal paintings. One area deserving further exploration would be to investigate why this strange tradition developed. Why did the Romans think they had a right to know about their conquests on a detailed level? What does it say about Roman society that the elite at least pretended to present information about the frontier to the public? What effect did this have on Imperial policy?

On the one hand, ancient Romans expected to be presented with extensive and accurate information about the territories they conquered. On the other hand, what little evidence we have suggests that this expectation was extensively exploited by the elites for their own political agendas.

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2 Due to spatial constraints, only a select bibliography can be provided in this article as a guide to further investigation. For the Roman triumph, Versnel 1970 remains an important work. Recent major studies include Bergmann/Kondoleon 1999; Itgenshorst 2005; Beard 2007; La Rocca et al. 2008; Pittenger 2008; Östenberg 2009.

3 This article uses the term "monumental reliefs" to refer to large-scale sculpted reliefs, set up in publicly accessible space, by groups or individuals acting in the capacity of official positions of authority (Sobocinski/Wolfram Thill 2015, 279). Traditionally such sculptures are referred to as "historical" or "state" reliefs; for critique see Hölscher 2015, 37; Sobocinski/Wolfram Thill 2015, 276–279.

4 Hölscher 2015; Sobocinski/Wolfram Thill 2015.

5 Mielke 1915; Drexel 1918; Behn 1919. For a similar approach to the depicted Dacian buildings on Trajan's Column and the Great Trajanic Frieze, see e. g. Antonescu 2009 and Gauer 1973 respectively; Parthian buildings on the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome, Brilliant 1967.

6 Wolfram Thill 2010; Wolfram Thill 2011; Wolfram Thill 2017; see also Ferris 2009, 153–157.

7 Josephus, Bellum Iudaicum 7.139–148.

8 For the connections among architectural depictions, triumphal painting and monumental reliefs, see Zinserling 1959/60; Torelli 1982, 119–125; Hölscher 1991, 293–294; Hölscher 2006, 37, 39; Holliday 1997, 129–130, 134–137; La Rocca 2000, 63; Settis 1988, 94–96; 2005, 75–77. Lusnia 2006 has even gone so far as to argue that the panels of the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome are direct reproductions in stone of triumphal paintings.

9 Beard 2007, 151, 179; Östenberg 2009, 189–215.

10 Beard 2007, 179–180; Östenberg 2009, 189–215

11 Hölscher 2015, 36–37; Sobocinski/Wolfram Thill 2015, 279.

12 Wolfram Thill 2011, 285.

13 For explanation of my methodology for quantitative analysis of the architectural depictions on Trajan's Column, see Wolfram Thill 2010, esp. 28–29. For the Column's depicted architecture in general, see Coulston 1990; Wolfram Thill 2010; Wolfram Thill 2011.

14 Wolfram Thill 2017.

15 For the Great Trajanic Frieze, see Leander Touati 1987.

16 Pirson 1996, esp. 158; Hölscher 2000, 97.

17 For architectural depictions on the frieze of Marcus' Column, see Hanoune 2000; Wolfram Thill 2011.

18 Beckmann 2011, 89–98.

19 Ferris 2009, 155; Beckmann 2011, 89–91; Wolfram Thill 2011, 301, 304.

20 Sommer 2012a, 163–164 has suggested that the palisade at the beginning of the frieze of Marcus' Column may commemorate the establishment of major wooden palisades along the Raetian Limes under Marcus Aurelius (Sommer 2012a; Sommer 2012b). Even with a historical impetus, the inclusion of a depicted palisade was a choice by the production team that would have affected the scene's impact. Beckmann 2011, 97 attributes the addition of the fence to the Antonine artists' *horror vacui*.

21 For the panels from a lost Aurelian arch (or arches), see Ryberg 1967.

22 For the Arch see Brilliant 1967. Since my focus here is on monuments in the capital, I leave aside the contested architectural depictions on the Arch of Septimius Severus in Leptis Magna (Strocka 1972), which may or may not represent frontier buildings.

23 For example, Beard (2007, esp. 37–41, 109–110, 167–173) discusses extensively possible distortion in the triumph as a whole or literary descriptions of the triumphal components, but only briefly (185–186) mentions the possibility of purposeful distortion in the original components themselves.

24 Caligula: Persius, Satires 6.43–47, Suetonius, Caligula 47; Domitian: Pliny the Younger, Panegyricus 16.3, Tacitus, Agricola 39.

25 This manipulation of the details can go beyond outright falsehood, such as the arranging of spoils so that Cretan and Thracian weaponry stood out in piles of Macedonian arms in Aemilius Paullus' triumph over Macedonia, thus implying a victory over a more varied force (Plutarch, Aemilius Paullus 32.5–8).

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